

Lukashenko Growls at Inauguration

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President Alexander Lukashenko carrying a bouquet of flowers Friday during his inauguration ceremony in Minsk. **Sergei Grits**

MINSK — Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko warned Friday that no dissent will be tolerated as he took the oath of office for a fourth time in a ceremony that was boycotted by European Union ambassadors.

Lukashenko was re-elected last month in a vote widely seen as fraudulent and has since cracked down on the opposition, including jailing hundreds of opposition protesters and also seven candidates who ran against him in the Dec. 19 poll. Lukashenko also closed the office for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe after its election observers called the vote flawed.

"The people have spoken, confirming once again that Belarus is a free and democratic state, and the choice made by the people is sacred and indisputable," Lukashenko said from the podium.

The 56-year-old president has accused Poland and Germany of plotting to overthrow him, claims both countries have rejected. The resulting tensions between the EU and Belarus are

pushing the country back into Russia's orbit.

This was on display during the swearing-in ceremony Friday, which was attended by Russia's ambassador but boycotted by envoys of EU nations, who visited a university for students exiled from Belarus in neighboring Lithuania.

Lukashenko defended the legitimacy of his re-election and vowed that Belarus would stamp out any signs of the kind of peaceful revolutions that overthrew regimes in Ukraine in 2005 — known as the Orange Revolution — and Georgia in 2003, in what came to be known as the Rose Revolution.

"The virus of color revolutions defeats only weak nations," Lukashenko said, adding that Belarus has "exhausted the limits of revolutions and upheavals" and his government would "safeguard security and stability against plots from within and outside the country."

Those words were upheld outside the building on a central square later Friday, when up to 10 people who had arrived to peacefully protest the inauguration were hustled aboard a police bus.

One of the detained demonstrators, Maxim Vinyarsky, called Lukashenko "a dictator who stole power and takes political prisoners."

The EU has threatened to reimpose travel restrictions on Lukashenko and other top officials over the flawed elections and subsequent crackdown if 30 opposition activists, including four presidential candidates, are not released. Lukashenko, who appeared to rule that out on Thursday, ordered his government to prepare harsh retaliatory measures if the sanctions are applied.

The travel ban on Lukashenko and others had been lifted in 2008 as the country, once described by the United States as Europe's last dictatorship, made modest progress on rights issues.

Several EU member states and EU's Foreign Affairs chief Catherine Ashton also have said they may reinstate the ban when EU foreign ministers meet in Brussels on Jan. 31.

Lukashenko's security forces have conducted an uncompromising crackdown on anyone thought to have played a role in the protests, making more arrests, collecting fingerprints and confiscating journalists' files and hard drives.

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